

# The last word: days of whines and ruses

By the editors

As we finish editing this issue, in the United States the Presidential election is running full blast. It appears close, which is to say the country is evenly divided in choosing between two distinct versions of neoliberal capitalism: the more human and socially conscious one and the more corporate and unyielding one. Last year it was Republicans in Wisconsin attacking teachers and other public sector unions, this year it's Democrats doing the same thing in Chicago. Whoever is in charge, the basics remain the same: ever widening gap between the rich and everyone else, the economic decline of the middle class, loss of family wage jobs, assaults on unions in the private and public sectors, a high unemployment rate as the new normal, financialization of everything possible, bankers calling the shots and facing no significant reforms, corporations defined as people, and so on.

But rather than centering on the differences as they appear in political strategy, rhetoric, and marketing around the leading candidates, we'd like to consider the marked shift to an increasingly polarized public sphere. The Republicans have moved further to the right under the sway of the Tea Party and Christian fundamentalists to the point of preferring to put forward ideologically pure candidates even if they lose specific elections for Congress and state government. Moderates have been undermined, banished, and forced to retire.

In the aftermath of the Great Recession starting in 2008, the Republican long-term strategy was actively refusing any compromise with the Obama administration, blocking any amelioration of the crisis, and then using the stalemate as "proof" that Obama and Democrats should be replaced. Concomitant with that, all other issues became part of an increasingly polarized and antagonistic and adversarial pattern.

It's been widely observed, and increasingly documented with empirical

research that the political polarization has lead to people increasingly choosing media that simply reflects and amplifies their existing views rather than trying to learn about or learn from other views. But the growing polarization and amplification of political noise has genuine and deleterious effects not just on discourse, but also on understanding. Whereas in the past, different parties could mark their differences, measure them, and try to have a discussion that at least clarified the gap if it didn't form a bridge to cross it, today dogmatism drives out critical thought and the possibility of forming ideas.

Case in point, this past spring the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, a weekly newspaper that functions as the *Wall Street Journal* for U.S. colleges and universities, saw an eruption of hysterical controversy when a regular blogger on the *CHE* website offered an opinion piece on the validity of African American Studies. A few weeks earlier, a *CHE* staff reporter attended a conference event at Northwestern University celebrating the first group of graduate students completing their PhDs in the recently established Black Studies graduate program. A summary appeared reporting the occasion.

Northwestern had been excruciatingly slow in setting up such a graduate program. It established an undergraduate African American Studies program in the 1980s in response to student activism, but it resisted having a PhD, although many of its peer institutions had done so early on. But precisely because of this late start, the school managed to leapfrog a frequent problem of the "first generation" of African American studies PhD programs which were often shaped by faculty who were very progressive in advancing their field, but who were socially traditional or conservative in other aspects, and thus too often hostile to feminist and queer students, faculty and perspectives; to a more international and global perspective; to interdisciplinary studies; to media and cultural studies approaches, and so forth. By arriving very late to the party, Northwestern clearly recruited faculty and students with a much younger generation's perspective.

Reporting on the conference, the *CHE* described the weekend and highlighted several of the students finishing their dissertations. Many days later, the regular blogger, Naomi Schaefer Riley, who seemed to have been selected to represent a politically conservative viewpoint, offered her opinion in a piece entitled: "The Most Persuasive Case for Eliminating Black Studies? Just Read the Dissertations."

Rushing in, though rather late, Riley stuck her foot in it, arguing that African American Studies was not a valid intellectual enterprise. Her headline (which she apparently provided) said reading the student's dissertations made her case. However, the students had not finished their dissertations and the conference consisted of brief presentations

of part of their work in progress. Therefore no one could “read the dissertations.” Oblivious to that, Riley went ahead with her attack. The response was predictable and quickly hundreds of negative comments were added to the original posting: many pointed out the flaw of “proving” something from material that the author had not read; many called Riley out on racist assumptions; some called for her dismissal as a blogger. With Twitter and Facebook users entering the fray, Riley’s critics were soon joined by far Right defenders who attacked the critics. The controversy soared to over 1400 comments in a few days before the *CHE* shut down adding new comments. A few days later the *CHE* editors first defended Riley as promoting active discussion, then after a few more days, and the controversy erupting across other *CHE* blogs, finally ended her column. In her last post Riley didn’t reverse herself or admit any problem but tried to just brazen it out.

Predictably, Riley supporters decried the *Chronicle* for ending her “freedom of speech,” and so forth (rather neatly ignoring that the *Chronicle* is a for-profit business corporation and has no obligation to promote civil liberties that mess with its bottom line). Many of them had to finesse or admit that at best Riley had offered only a knee-jerk right wing critique that was intellectually indefensible, and that the collection of her previous columns had suffered from the same problem of no research, no rigorous thought about the issues, and a totally casual presentation which amounted to presenting an attitude rather than arguing an opinion.

While the dynamics of the events were interesting, particularly in showing the power of social media, even in an academic setting, to quickly create a crowd of flaming comments on both sides, in retrospect the incident stands as another example of the heightened polarization of discourse in the United States. While it might be expected, even “normal” in the political sphere, especially in an election season, the spill over into intellectual, academic, and scholarly discussion and decision-making is increasingly clear. Another dramatic example was provided over the summer when the governing body of the University of Virginia forced the resignation of its new president, in office for only two years. Faculty and students were appalled and quickly responded to what turned out to be a high handed move by the Rector (head) of the Board of Visitors to change things by consulting for only a few moments by phone with a few members of the board, arguing (incorrectly as it turned out) that the president was not moving fast enough to implement new digital instruction systems. The source of the “let’s run it like a for-profit corporation” Rector’s impulse? A *Wall Street Journal* pundit’s opinion piece that higher education could save money and leapfrog into the future with MOOC instruction. The tantalizing sizzle of Massive Open Online Course instruction hype simply overcame any reasoned thought and short circuited asking deeper questions or looking at possible

consequences. After a couple of weeks, the president was re-instated.

The United States has an excruciating history of Know-Nothingism and active repression of the most elementary science, dismissal of historical facts that contradict prejudices, and so forth. In the past this was demonstrated by the long shadow of the Scopes trial over teaching evolution; today we see it featured in the chorus of denial that humans have any possible effect on Earth's climate. The ideological polarization is inflated by new developments. The Twitterverse allows instant and uninformed opinion to travel far and fast. An increasingly active view of education from pre-school through advanced graduate work as a consumer good rather than a social good fuels the climate. The privatization of education funding, which includes the gutting of state support for public schools and the resulting increase in student tuition which ends up being paid by student debt which can never be discharged, even by bankruptcy.

In the fight over public opinion, the Right has gradually been learning how to get its message out. This goes far beyond the obvious case of Rupert Murdoch's newspapers and Fox News distortion, far beyond the exclamatory ranting of the now decades old right wing talk radio and evangelical television. Slowly, often clumsily, the right has been producing feature films that actually have some niche space in the multiplexes. Many of these have been documentary "exposés" imitating the model of Michael Moore's serio-comic investigations. For example, *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed* (2008) tried to argue that there is a vast conspiracy in higher education against the newly labeled version of Creationism called "Intelligent Design." Far Right ideologue Dinesh D'Souza produced *2016: Obama's America* just in time for the current election season and managed to get bookings into many multiplexes thus parlaying the \$2.5M estimated budget into \$32M theatrical by the end of September. Deep pocket conservative businessmen have poured money into attempts to create plausible dramas from libertarian or fundamentalist favorites: drawn from Ayn Rand's massive novel, *Atlas Shrugged: Part I* (2011) is being followed by Part II, despite execrable reviews by mainstream reviewers of the first one. On the other hand two other sponsored films driving an anti-teacher-union agenda and promotion of charter schools have been moderately successful: the documentary *Waiting for "Superman"* (2010, \$6.4M in 3 months, theatrical) and the dramatic feature *Won't Back Down* (2012, still in release). Conceivably, right wing agenda driven films could add to the lively discussion of important issues. But that also depends on the cultural climate.

It was fairly clear from the actual day President Obama won the election that he intended to work together, to compromise, to get an agenda moving forward. This was most obvious on the financial front where he set a goal of simply recovering what could be salvaged, of

stopping the downflow of the Great Recession, of saving banks and auto making, by working with many of the people and institutions that had created the disaster in the first place. But from the get-go the Republicans, fired by their Tea Party base, openly declared they would not cooperate, compromise, or respond to any invitations. The marching orders from day one were clear: decry, obstruct, delay, blame. Polarization was the norm. That same attitude has simply spread through the culture. Belligerence is the norm. In this context something like Naomi Schaeffer Riley's ignorant stubbornness becomes the norm. Refuse to back down, no apology, no regrets, no concessions.

The polarization, we'd argue, rather than contributing to debate and discussion, through a sifting of claims and a balancing between differences, leading to an informed resolution or thoughtful compromise, simply continues the exhaustion, exclusion, and frustration. Rather than moving forward, stagnation becomes the norm. Compromise is impossible and disintegration, inevitably, begins. After a while it has to be recognized that indeed this is the plan, this is the goal: ratcheting up the impasse so finally almost anything seems like relief.

But if there's no immediate relief in sight, what is to be done? It's always necessary and worthwhile to answer the barrage of right wing fear mongering, if only to show there is an alternative view. But it is also useful to turn the matter to a deeper discussion. To return to the Riley example, it was easy to point out her total ignorance when she dismissed a student working on the topic of black midwives and another on real estate "redlining" (discrimination against minority loans) in Chicago. Both had well documented histories that Riley ignored. But the deeper question which applies not only to Riley but the whole current conservative apparatus is this: Why is it the Right which is so fixated on identity and difference? And with the crudest possible imagining of what identity is? This goes so far as the recurrent Tea Party meme of asking if Barack Obama is American, or if he is black enough. What it boils down to is the desire and need of the right to contain people of color, women (particularly in terms of reproduction rights at present), queers, immigrants, students and youth, the unemployed and underemployed, the people in mortgage and foreclosure hell.

Yet those are the people who suddenly became present a year ago in the Occupy Wall Street movement. It took a great effort to try to exclude those folks from common public space, but the goal of the power structure was clear: to not allow those people to express their own concerns, their own identity, their own sense of what the goals should be and how to get there. The public face of OWS has declined, and significantly changed. But the underlying desire for and need to

express an alternative vision is there, and will be there, appearing in different forms, mutating into different places and directions. Whatever happens in the election, the ferment will continue.

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